Thinking as Translation.
The Silent Dialogue with Myself as Another

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Abstract.- In this paper, I argue that the activity of translating can be found at the very core of philosophizing, in the experience of thinking itself. Firstly, I argue that a genuine translation entails thinking together with the translated author, by imagining a dialogue with him or her. Secondly, I argue that thinking itself is a process of translation. Starting form Plato's and Aristotle's depictions of thinking as dialogue, I argue that we can find a similar treatment of thinking in Heidegger's analysis of the "voice of conscience", and I show how the dialogue with my own conscience has a translative effect: it transports me from the inauthenticity of my everyday life towards my possible and better self. Thus, not only translation, but thinking too is a form of hospitality, the thinker being a host for his own possible self.
Keywords: thinking, translation, hospitality, foreignization, *Ereignis*, Heidegger.

In this paper, I intend to discuss the place of translation in philosophy and to show that translation is not external to it: for the philosopher, translating is more than a useful activity. My purpose is to argue that, actually, *the activity of translating can be found at the very core of philosophizing*, that is, *in the experience of thinking itself*, and that *translation can be considered a necessary moment of genuine understanding*, especially the understanding of another and of myself. I will develop this thesis in two steps: (1) Firstly, I will elaborate on the idea that a good translation – at least a good *philosophical* translation – always entails *an effort of genuine thinking* alongside the translated author, by staging a *dialogue* in which the translator tries to imagine what the author would say about the way his thoughts are rendered. (I will give a concrete example of such an imagined dialogue from my own experience as co-translator into Romanian of Heidegger's *Vorträge und Aufsätze / Conferences and Studies*, with respect to the Heideggerian highly difficult term *Ereignis*.) Of course, this dialogue should go even further than establishing the intentions of the author; this dialogue is not only a meeting between a certain author and a certain reader (i.e. the translator), but between their respective forms of life, as expressed by their respective languages. A good philosophical translation should do justice to both of them, seen as a guest language and a host language, whose meeting should follow the laws of hospitality. Being obliged to accommodate a foreigner, the host language not only enriches itself, but also reaches a better self-understanding.

(2) Secondly, after elaborating on the idea that a genuine translation is always a thoughtful one, I will argue that *thinking itself is, essentially, a process of translation: it is translative.*

That is so because the experience of thinking about something is, in its most spontaneous and immediate form, a *dialogue* between me and myself as another self – a dialogue "two-in-one", as Hannah Arendt calls it, in which I examine all the aspects I can imagine. Depictions of thinking as conversation can be found right at the beginnings of philosophy, in Plato and Aristotle. I will try to show, very briefly, that we can identify an interpretation of thinking as dialogue also in Heidegger's analysis of "the voice of conscience" from *Sein und Zeit*. In the present context, this interpretation will be most relevant, because it can apply also to the way we should regard the encounter between two languages in the process of translating a philosophical text.

(1) Let us begin with the idea that the translator of a philosophical text should make the effort of thinking *together with* the author, by imagining a dialogue with him, by asking: would he agree with the way I rendered his thoughts? The very experience of such a dialogue is a proof that thoughts *can* be translated. Against the pessimism of those who believe that there are *un*translatable philosophers – such as Hegel, Heidegger or Derrida –, it should be said that what is at stake in any philosophical translation is to render *thoughts*, not dictionary words. (Many would agree with this seemingly banal idea, but not with its true consequences, e.g. the creation of new words in the target language.) The reference point should not be the generally accepted translation of a certain expression, but the thought it expresses. An idiomatic expression or a complicated German word might not be translatable, but a thought can be. Of course, an idea is always reached from within a certain language. In the process of translating an idea, some of it might be lost; but the target language might highlight another aspect of the respective thought. Those who talk about untranslatability of some philosophical texts still work with the unsustainable ideal of a perfect translation, without any loss or addition. Notwithstanding, the plurality of languages and the partiality of each of them are inescapable. So, what is at stake for a translator is to find in his own language the best word(s) to express the respective thought, by constructing a comparable, as Ricoeur argues[1].

By saying all these, I imply that there is a distance between thoughts and words, in the sense that a thought is not consumed by a certain formulation of it. This is not to be understood in a vulgarized Platonic fashion, thoughts being the intelligible, and words the sensible. We know from our experience as thinkers that we cannot have thoughts without words (even if we can have words without genuine thoughts). And from our experience as

[1] In Ricoeur, P.: *On Translation*, translated by Eileen Brennan, with an introduction by Richard Kearney, London & New York, Routledge, pp. 36-37.

partners in dialogue we know that thoughts can be rendered in more than one way. We often clarify a thought by rephrasing it. Sometimes, we might think that a phrase expresses perfectly a certain thought, and still have to rephrase it in order to communicate it to somebody else, not necessarily because she has a different mother tongue, but because she has, perhaps, a different background or just a different way of using the same language as we do. Let me rephrase this, by saying that we translate not only from one language to another, but also within the very same language – when we try to find comparable formulations for the same idea. But how are we to understand this "same"? The very possibility of translation indicates that it cannot be grasped from a substantialist perspective. A Heideggerian phrase, for instance, and its various translations do not have in common an intrinsic quality. What brings them together is the attempt to express the same idea. There is no red thread binding them. Rather, they are linked to one another by being used in order to express that thought, as in a Wittgensteinian wool thread; they are linked by family resemblances.

We cannot find the thought without the words. The general, the abstract cannot be found without the individual and the concrete. An idea will always be expressed in a certain language. However, this does not mean that other languages cannot petition the human reason (or reasonability) in order to express that idea. And what they can hope to offer is a comparable, a close kin to the original.

I will take as an example a very important Heideggerian term: *das Ereignis* (Heidegger declared it the leading word for his thinking after 1936[2]). The dictionary translation of this word is „event" (and the verb *sich ereignen* is usually translated by "to happen", "to occur"). However, Heidegger uses it because he has in mind something more relevant philosophically. Even if "*eignis*" from *Ereignis* is etymologically derived from *Auge*, „eye", it still has a strong connotation of *eigen*, „proper", „own".

Heidegger uses *Ereignis* to indicate the genuine relationship between man and Being. It is about a correspondence, an *Entsprechung* more originary than the rapport between subject and object that has been so dominant since Descartes. In this latter case, the subject, through re-presentation, puts before him the object and subjects it to his will to knowledge and, ultimately, to his will to power. The often quoted maxim of this seeming omnipotent human will is "If you really *want* to do something, you *can* do it!". The subject is active, he has the initiative, the object is passive. In the face of an omnipotent subject

[2] Cf. Heidegger, M.: *Wegmarken*, GA 9, Frankfurt a.M., V. Klostermann, 1967, p. 316 (marginal note).

that wants to preserve his omnipotence, the object has no chance to essentially change the subject one way or another. In the hands of the modern subject, Being becomes its object, a disposable asset.

In contradistinction to this simplified, strong version of the subject–object rapport, that still dominates our contemporary world, Heidegger tries to bring to the fore an altogether different relationship, one that seems to have been prominent for the ancient Greeks. It is about a relationship in which the "object" is the agent, so to speak. Man is overwhelmed by the phenomenality of the *physis*, of "nature", he is struck by wonder, he is amazed by the pure fact that something *is*. For the Greek man, the world is populated with gods because it is full of wonders. However, these wonders would not be such if not seen and sang and studied by man. This is also valid for the relationship between man and Being: man would not be man without this special relationship to Being, given the fact that he can see and name the Being of the beings he encounters in nature or he creates. At the same time, Being needs man in order to be seen and named. They both need one another in order to become themselves, to gain what belongs to them in the most essential way. Precisely this is the sense of the prefix *er*: it expresses the success (as in *Erfolg*) in gaining what is proper, *eigen*. (Heidegger uses *Ereignis* also because of the folk etymology that connects *Ereignis* with *eigen*.) Each of the two gains his proper, his own self *because of* the other, *with the help of* the other. It is a close and essential reciprocity. But the protagonist of this relationship, i.e. the one that inaugurates it, is Being, and not man. And philosophy is, according to Heidegger, man's most informed and profound answer to the call of Being to name it and think it.

Given all these, when we had to find a translation for *Ereignis* into Romanian, the other co-translator of the volume *Conferences and Studies* into Romanian, Bogdan Mincă, suggested: *obţinerea propriului*, i.e. "obtaining what is proper to somebody or something", "what is one's own". However, I argued that "obtaining" still reminds of the power of the subject to determine and, thus, to dominate the object. So, I suggested to replace the verb *a obţine* ("to obtain") with *a dobândi*, which, having a Slavic origin, does not belong to the metaphysical realm of the Latin language and, in addition to that, has a connotation of "being conferred with…" or "being bestowed with…", which reflects the initial passivity of the "subject". So, our translation of *Ereignis* is *dobândirea propriului*, that is, "being

bestowed with one's own self"[3]. Interestingly enough, the Romanian verb *a dobândi* comes from the Slavic *dobyti*, „to obtain", „to gain", which comes from the Slavic *byti*, „to be", which pertains to the large Indo-European family of the root **bhu-*, „to be", from which derive the Greek *phyo*, *physis*, the Latin *fio*, *fieri*, the Romanian *a fi*, *fost*, the German *bin*, *bist*, or the English *to be*. Here is how something is lost and something else is gained: What is lost is the idea of "event", of the extraordinary *happening* of reaching one's self. However, the Romanian translation expresses the fundamental character of being bestowed with what is proper for oneself, given the kinship of *a dobândi* with "to be": when reaching what is proper to one, one's *being* is gained.

Of course, Heidegger uses *Ereignis* in both senses: the common one, "event", and the new, philosophical one, the rare and precious happening of "being bestowed with one's own self". By doing that, he proceeds in the good old fashion, inaugurated by the first philosophers, of taking a common, usual word and use it in a new way, that discloses and illuminates reality anew. The problem is that Romanian does not have a similar dual word, relating both to "event" and to "proper". The easy way out would be, of course, to translate it with… *eveniment* (the Romanian for "event"); but this would be just another case in which "the easy way out" is also a way out of philosophy. The only solution is to leave aside the usual meaning and to translate directly the philosophical one. *Dobândirea propriului*, "being bestowed with one's own self", is one attempt to do that. One still holding the ideal that a translation should sound as if the text was written in the target language might say it is not an elegant solution. However, I think this compromise solution is a good example of what Ricoeur calls *hospitality* when describing the relationship between the languages involved in translation (seen as hospitality, translation must involve compromising, just like a host should compromise in order to accommodate a visitor). *Dobândirea propriului* is a form of *hospitality* because in this case the translation does not try to silently appropriate the meaning and pretend that the idea captured by *Ereignis* was thought directly in Romanian. If, perhaps, the Romanian version does not sound very "elegant" it is because the thought of "being bestowed with one's own self" was previously thought in a *different* language – a stranger, a foreigner that has to be received in the house of the host *as the foreigner*, and not

[3] The English version of *Ereignis* offered by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly in their translation of *Beiträge zur Philosophie / Contributions to Philosophy* is more courageous than ours, because they actually created a new English word: *enowning*. The prefix "en" mirrors the German *er*, and "owning" expresses the connotation of "proper", "own". Of course, their translation has been highly criticised by those who believe that a translation should not involve such dramatic solutions and should not show itself as a translation.

as a prisoner from a defeated country. In Venuti's famous terms[4], a philosophical translation should be marked by *foreignization*, and not domestication – not only regarding the terms used, but the entire style of a translation. (Just a small example in this respect: if Heidegger starts his sentences with certain words, for the sake of the argument in the text the translation should do the same, even if a different order of words would sound more elegant in the target language.)

Surely, we should not fall into the other extreme: the translation should not be unintelligible. Hospitality does not mean that the host gets conquered by the guest. It means that the two engage in an ongoing dialogue, a dialogue of thought. Hopefully, this dialogue facilitates an *Ereignis*: by acknowledging one another in their otherness, in their alterity, both host and guest can end up "being bestowed with one's own self", that is, becoming themselves by becoming aware of themselves, in their difference from one another. To give just a short example, when a Romanian is confronted with the task of translating the way Being is captured in German, as a verbal noun: *das Sein*, it becomes clear that the Romanian language has a substantialist point of view on Being: because instead of a verbal noun, we most often use a mere noun: *ființă*[5].

In conclusion, the translator of a philosophical text should not refrain from choosing less elegant solutions when the thought or the argument that should be translated calls for it. If the translation does not reflect the thinking from the original text, what's the point of translating?[6] Any thoughtful act of translation should have a translative effect – especially in the case of an author (philosopher or poet) who forces the limits of her language. The translation should be as daring as the original – or even more, when the thought that has to be translated calls for radical gestures such as the complete change of the meaning of a word[7]. By foreignization, a language does not lose itself, because no language can simply reflect another. The effort in finding a comparable can involve the

[4] Venuti, L.: *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, London & New York, Routledge, 1995.
[5] Actually, the Romanian comparable for *Sein* is the verbal noun *fiire*; but the first translators of Heidegger into Romanian did not chose it, because it sounded less familiar to the common ear. Now, it would be difficult to change the established translation, *fiin□□*.
[6] As Walter Benjamin says in "The Translator's Task", a translation should not be done "for readers" ("for readers who do not understand the original"), because neither the original text was written for them (Benjamin, W.: "The Translator's Task", translated by Steven Rendall, in *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, vol. 10, No. 2, 1997, p. 151). In other words, the translation of a very difficult text should not be a softer, lighter version of it, but a text of comparable difficulty.
[7] For example, Heidegger does this with the German *das Gestell* (in Heidegger, M., „Die Frage nach der Technik" (1953), *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (1936-1953), GA 7, Frankfurt a.M., V. Klostermann, 2000, p. 23). He uses the term *Gestell* to designate the essence of technology, given that it literally means the totality (*Ge-*) of all the movements of putting and placing (*stellen*). Usually, *Gestell* means "rack" (a piece of equipment, usually made of metal or wooden bars, that is used for holding things or for hanging things on).

most hidden depths of the target language, discovering new meanings and revitalizing old words. A good example in this respect is the Romanian translation proposed by Bogdan Mincă for *Anwesen*, rendered usually by *prezență* ("presence"). His solution is *adăstare* ("awaiting", "remaining"), based on the excellent correspondence between the German prefix *an-* and the Romanian prefix „ad-", both meaning "coming from…, towards…": something is here, present, because it came *from* concealment, *towards* disclosure.[8]

(2) Now, we can make the second step in the argument in favour of the idea that translation is at the very core of philosophizing: *thinking itself is, essentially, a process of translation*, because thinking about something is, spontaneously, a *dialogue* between a host and a guest, between me and myself as another self.

Thinking has been regarded as an inner dialogue since the beginnings of philosophy. At the end of *Hippias Major*, for example, Socrates says that when he will go home after the discussion with Hippias about the Beautiful, he will have to face "that man who is continually refuting me"; "he is a very near relative of mine and lives in the same house" (304d). This "near relative" will be called by later philosophers, simply, "conscience" (even in the sense of *moral* conscience). From the context of Socrates' reference to his "inner man", we can easily deduce that he is at odds with himself when he does something wrongly, in this case when he talks about the Beautiful without having the experience of producing beautiful things. The matter of principle pertains to the ethics of discourse: one should not say (nor do) something that his conscience tells him is wrong. So Socrates indicates a fundamental demand: not to be in conflict with oneself. The same demand appears in *Gorgias*, when he tells Callicles the following: "I, my very good sir, should rather choose to have my lyre, or some chorus that I might provide for the public, out of tune and discordant, or to have any number of people disagreeing with me and contradicting me, than that I should have internal discord and contradiction in my own single self" (482b-c).

In *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt analyses at length the ethical implications of thinking understood as dialogue two-in-one[9]. The main idea would be that the reason for not doing wrong is the great discomfort and unhappiness of living with a wrong-doer

[8] The argument for this translation can be found in: Minc□, B.: "Die Übersetzung von Heideggers *Vorträge und Aufsätze* ins Rumänische als ein philosophisches Gespräch mit drei anderen Sprachen (Deutsch, Latein, Griechisch)", in *Heidegger Studies*, vol. 28/2012.
[9] Cf. Arendt, H.: *The Life of the Mind*, vol. I: „Thinking", ed. Mary McCarthy, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, pp. 179-193.

(hence the common expression "After doing that, I could not live with myself anymore")[10]. That is why Socrates says that "doing wrong is worse than suffering it, and escaping punishment worse than incurring it" (*Gorgias*, 474b). And that is why Aristotle says, in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, that the virtuous man "always stays in accord with himself', does not quarrel with himself, so to speak; he is his own very best friend (1166a10; 1168b5). He feels good with himself, he likes his own company, has no regrets. Whereas the vicious person (if he is aware of being too weak to avoid being vicious) is in permanent disagreement with himself and tries to forget himself by avoiding being all alone with himself and by always mixing with others. He tries to avoid hearing the voice of the inner man, telling him how vicious he is. Only the virtuous can be friends with himself. And friendship towards oneself is a precondition for the friendship towards others, because genuine friendship, being based on mutual admiration for the other's character, can exist only between virtuous people.

As I said at the beginning, I think that also Heidegger's analyses of "the voice of conscience" (*die Stimme des Gewissens*) from *Sein und Zeit* entail an interpretation of thinking as dialogue – precisely because Heidegger determines "the voice of conscience" as "the voice of the friend that each of us carries with himself"[11]. Well, the voice of this "friend", the call of my conscience is, actually, the voice of my better, possible self, constituted by all my true possibilities of being. This friend calls me away *from* the inauthenticity of everyday life, *towards* the realisation of these possibilities, of my authentic self. From this perspective, thinking has, essentially, a translative dimension: it entails a transportation, a delocalization of my self in order to find myself. It could mean a delocalization of myself form the chains of a terrible and self-destructive marriage; it could mean a transportation from a limited job in a bank to a new life as an independent farmer or as a full-time painter. — Why is it my true self so foreign to me that it assumes the role of an *alter*? He is a foreigner not only because I do not know him very well (being caught in our everyday routine, I don't usually spend too much time with my authentic self, that is, I don't think too much), but also because he is a *possible* me, I am not him yet. However, he *is* a friend, because – having in mind Aristotle's definition of friendship – he intends what is good for me. And being my

[10] We know that, in some cases, "internal discord and contradiction" might even make somebody go mad, as in the case portrayed in Fritz Lang's film from 1945, *Scarlet Street*: the case of the murderer who confesses his crime (a perfect crime), but nobody believes him (he had been too successful in leaving no trace). By not acknowledging his guilt, the others don't give him the occasion to become in accord with his own conscience.
[11] In original, "[die] Stimme des Freundes, den jedes Dasein bei sich trägt" (Heidegger, M.: *Sein und Zeit* (1927), GA 2, Frankfurt a.M., V. Klostermann, 1977, p. 163.

more authentic, possible self, even if he seems foreign and coming from far away, he is in fact what is for me the closest. Even if, in all the noise of my everyday life, I do not hear his calling, he still calls me. Even if I do not know him, he lives with me in the most intimate intimacy. Because of this inner friend – we can also call him "conscience" –, even the most vicious have the possibility to change for the better.

In conclusion, the close relationship between thinking and translation does not limit itself to the fact that a genuine translation is a thoughtful one, but it means also that genuine thinking is translatory. The translative dimension of thinking indicates that translation should occupy a very important place in philosophy, because it represents an excellent occasion to exercise this capacity implied in the silent dialogue with myself as another (*avec moi-même comme un autre*, in Ricoeur's words): the capacity to see things from another's point of view, the capacity to see even *ourselves* (our language, our form of life) from another's point of view. This capacity to stage a dialogue with a virtual other should be exercised in concrete encounters with other people, fictional or not, such as Madame Bovary or Oblomov, my mother or my neighbour, Kant or Heidegger. Our imagination is limited, and its limits are narrower than the natural margins of human plurality. In other words, we cannot play the role of all the partners of dialogue that we should have when judging a certain matter. So we need real, non-imagined, surprising interlocutors. We have to walk on a stage that is not familiar to us, to appear in a play that we do not direct and is getting written while being played. This is why the dialogue of thought means also reading (we speak, for example, with Aristotle when we read him) and, of course, translating.

When translating, I can be a mental host for another because, from an *existential* perspective, I am myself a guest for myself. To be a host means to be firmly rooted in my facticity, i.e. in what I have already done, in what I actually have; it means to be sufficiently sure of myself in order to receive, to welcome the stranger in my house, in my language. Whereas to be a guest means to be *un*rooted and foreign, an infinite possibility for the host to understand himself better and for his facticity to change.